

Transcription: Joseph Esparza

Today is Thursday, August 26, 2010. My name is James Crabtree, and I'll be interviewing Joseph Esparza. This interview is being conducted at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and is in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Joseph, thank you first of all for taking time out of your day to come down and talk for this program so we can record some of your memories.

Joseph Esparza: Absolutely, thank you.

I guess the first question we almost always start off with is just tell the listeners a little bit about your life and your background before you joined the military.

Joseph Esparza: OK, well I guess my family history comes from West Texas. I was born in Midland, Texas in March of 1980, and my father worked in the agriculture. He worked for the federal, a federal office here in Glascock County. I've got two older brothers. One actually went to the Air Force Academy. My father was in the Army and my grandfather, both of them Army. We've got a long history here in Texas of I guess going back to the Texas Revolution to having family members in the military here.

How old were you when your brother went in the Air Force?

Joseph Esparza: My brother went to the Air Force Academy right out of high school, so I was a freshman in high school when he took off. So it was pretty good. He was always interested in Air Force and he knew what he was gonna do. I had no inclination of joining the military at that time when I was in high school, so it just kind of came up.

Tell us a little bit then about how that did happen, what the thought process was or the decision process.

Joseph Esparza: Well my older brother went to, my oldest brother John, he went to, he stayed in Glascock County when my family moved down to south Texas. My father passed away in 1989, and so he was pretty much the role model that I was going after. He went to Tech. I was comfortable, I was always a Tech fan, big Red Raider. And right out of high school I went to Tech as well. My freshman year was interesting. It was one of the neatest, greatest times of my life just being free and kind of getting out there and taking in life from out from under your mother's wing. First year went great. I took a full load, plus I was working as close to 40 hours as I could while going through there just to pay for college and pay for living.

That's a lot of work though.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, it really kind of caught up with me, you know. Summer time in Lubbock isn't exactly what people travel to Lubbock for I guess, and I remember working for an entomologist just out in cotton fields counting boll weevils for the summer time and I guess I got a lot of time to daydream and wonder, and kind of collect and try to find out where I am and where I'm going. Toward the end of the summer I started thinking about joining the military. I had no, I didn't have any idea if I was going to. I knew that school was hard and I knew that working was hard and paying for it was just going to be taking out student loans, so I was already kind of behind the eight ball on there, so yeah, so I kind of, I didn't have a question of if I was going to join. I was joining the Marine Corps. I mean that's just my mentality about I'm not gonna, I don't want to say this in a bad way, but I don't want to take the easy way out on anything.

So you never thought about the Air Force or –

Joseph Esparza: No, not at all, not for one second.

What did your family think about you wanting to go in the Marines?

Joseph Esparza: Well, my family didn't know actually. From the time it took me to figure out to walk into a recruiter's office, I think I was on a bus two days after that.

Wow, so you spent almost no time in delayed entry.

Joseph Esparza: No, I didn't. I wasn't a pullee. I didn't run. I wasn't even courted by a recruiter which I know that was kind of a bummer for them to not -

So you went in and signed up and two days later you were shipping out?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, actually my truck broke down in front of a recruiter's office so I kind of took it as a sign. It was right there, let's see, I guess it was 50th Street in Lubbock and I was driving by and I had the dog and I had an old '71 GMC pickup that all of a sudden just kind of quit so it started sputtering. I pulled into the parking lot. It turns out it was just a kinked fuel line. But I walked into the recruiter's office, sat down, talked to one of the staff sergeants there, saying hey yeah, just go ahead and wait right there. We'll get the staff sergeant, got me out here to talk to you. I actually sat for a little while. I think they were busy.

That's fast. I never heard of anybody going in and getting to boot camp. Usually it's a whole process of doing your health screening and paperwork. I think you set a record.

Joseph Esparza: I think it was October 7, and then October 11th was my first day at MCRD. I went in and we talked about what, I kind of just said yeah, put me down for whatever. They said well our next ship out is going on Monday. And so yeah, I was on a bus for MEPs that day going to Amarillo. I called, you know, I called my brothers and I called my mom before, and it was back before we had cell phones I guess, so I called my oldest brother first and told him. He was excited. About a minute after I got off the phone with him, my middle brother, Javier, he called and said are you crazy? I'm in the Air Force. You should've went in the Air Force. It's such an awesome thing. And I was like you know, I'm just kind of paving my way.

Did you sign up to go active duty or go back in the Reserves?

Joseph Esparza: I went in, I signed up to go active duty. When I got to MEPs, and MCRD, my recruiter, he gave me the option to do Reserves, so I guess yeah, right at the last minute I wanted to, but I always wanted to get college. I knew that was gonna be go and, you know, having to do it all over again, I probably would've finished college a lot sooner. I just graduated in 2009 in December. I probably would've finished a lot sooner if I'd have just done four and gave it all up and then just went to college, but I wouldn't do it any other way.

So what were your thoughts then? Describe what it was like when you actually arrived at the recruit depot. Did you get there at night?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I think they do that, I think everything is like that. I sure as anything got out of MEPs. The swear in thing at MEPs was pretty neat to do. The flight over, landing -

You flew from Amarillo?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I flew in from Amarillo to San Diego and flying in I kind of looked around trying to see who my crowd was, but I couldn't really figure it out. But at the USO they said we'll let you wait at USO. They've got *A Few Good Men* playing. They've got *Heartbreak Ridge*, they've got all sorts of movies playing and you're just, oh, let's get this first day over with and you're thinking I just want to go do what I want to do.

It's a real long day -

Joseph Esparza: It is, yeah, it's definitely.

I went through the MEPs in San Antonio, but I'm sure it's pretty similar to what you did where they got you at the MEPs probably 5:00 in the morning, early -

Joseph Esparza: Yeah.

And it seemed like you sat around all day for them to do any paperwork, and screenings of other people, and then they don't take you to the airport until late in the afternoon, early evening, and then they fly you out there and you get to San Diego and it's already night time, right?

Joseph Esparza: That's right.

It was night time when you're there, and then you sit around until they finally come with the buses to pick you up.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, that's a neat thing. I just remember seeing everybody carrying bags and I was wondering if I, because I didn't have a bag, you know -

I guess you didn't bring much.

Joseph Esparza: I didn't want to be, I wanted to be on the move, you know, quick on my feet, and I looked around and everybody had a bag and a few people had already gotten their heads buzzed and I just, I was just gonna let the Marine Corps take care of me.

Sure, you didn't need to bring anything really but yourself.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah.

They're gonna give you everything.

Joseph Esparza: I had a wallet with no money. But it was neat because right as soon as they get us in there, they file us. Boy, that DI, the drill instructor comes up, and he's just, oh my God, this is about to happen. You can feel that energy just move from the back to the bus running up, soon as he gets out, rushed out, running right behind a guy. I remember he went one way and I almost took a spill over one of those pile-on's they have out there. One thing to tell you, don't hurt yourself getting over there. You get over there. But that's just kind of the regular thing of we got those phone calls that everybody gets, that 10 seconds of hi, mother, father, I'm calling to inform you that I have made it here safely and I will be making you proud. And that's actually kind of the first time I talked to my mom. I called my mom to tell her I joined and she wasn't home, so I left a message, so I'm pretty sure that John and my other brother said that they took care of it and she was real proud.

I didn't even bother to make that phone call because they gave us so little time and I was so rushed, I just stayed in the back of the line. I didn't want to bother.

Joseph Esparza: You didn't even go through there, because we were, I was afraid to get out of line, man.

Well I mean they had us all in line, but they had all the pay phones and when one would come open, the drill instructor would yell, OK, and you'd go up there and I just didn't even go up because I knew I didn't have enough time and to even punch in the numbers and all that stuff, so I just didn't even want to bother with it. I remember too, they got you there really late at night and there's all this screaming and yelling and then they went through all your stuff and then they shaved your heads, and then it seemed like you sat in a big auditorium room all night doing more paperwork.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah.

And then they let you put your head down it didn't seem like it was very long, and next thing you know more drill instructors come in to get you. It might have been like 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning and you're going to chow hall.

Joseph Esparza: You're so disoriented and so your day really, they stretch you out. They really, that whole break you down, you know, they want to get you right at your weakest point and they do a good job and they have been for over 200 years.

When you got on that bus, did they make you close your eyes and put your head down on the ride to the depot?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I think somebody just mentioned it and I was kind of like you know, I wanted to get the full effect of the roller coaster ride so I remember just doing that and just kind of exactly. Oh, that's right because we drove out of the airport and into San Diego.

They made us close our eyes and put our heads down and it felt like we were just driving in circles all night. You might have been, too because you realize later that the depot is right next to the airport.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, until you even realize that. As a matter of fact it was nice, just went back not more than a couple of weeks ago to San Diego and it was the first time I got back there and that smell of that air, you know, that ocean air just gets you and you're 10 years younger.

Any time you fly in or out of San Diego you can always look down and see the parade ground, parade deck, see platoons out there marching around, especially on Sundays. So when you get, you're in boot camp and all that process starts, what are some of your memories about basic training? Anything that stands out?

Joseph Esparza: You know one thing that really stands out, getting crammed in the bathroom stall where everybody goes and you can't do anything by yourself. I remember considering myself one of the lucky people out of an 80 plus platoon that gets crammed in against a wall, but I get to be next to a window while I'm waiting to get sent out back there and I just remembered how fortunate sitting next to a window. You know, you're not in prison, but you can imagine it.

It feels worse than prison.

Joseph Esparza: Ah, this window is awesome and you get to see out. But no, boot camp was pretty thorough, pretty quick, and it doesn't even seem like 13 weeks once, but during week 11, week 12, week 13 it doesn't seem like 13 weeks I guess.

It seems like a long time when you're there. You're completely cut off from anything in the outside world other than what your DI's tell you or any letters you might get from home.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I got the letter about the A&M bonfire. I know that was an interesting thing.

So that happened while you were there?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah. I remember coming there.

So you go through all that training. Did you have an MOS assigned at that point?

Joseph Esparza: No, not at that point that I knew of. I really just thought it was going to be an O-3 building -

Did you even know what unit you were going to be going to after you got back as a reservist?

Joseph Esparza: I didn't know there was a reserve station there in Lubbock to tell you the truth, but it was apparently my paperwork had already been processed for me to go back to Lubbock and I didn't find that out probably until about halfway through boot camp, but I really didn't even know how the reserves worked. My two units were Lubbock for maybe two months, two or three months, and then I came down to Austin at the Weapons Company here where you had already been started I imagine when you got in.

How did you move from one unit to the other? Was that hard to transfer?

Joseph Esparza: It really wasn't. You kind of got, were given a hard time about it but ultimately it was just I don't want to be driving back from Austin to come up here, so it was pretty easy. At the time the Weapons Company was, they were using mechanics. I don't think they had but maybe two.

And that was General West?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I was a mechanic, I was an O-3, oh I'm sorry, no, 3521.

When did you join Weapons Company?

Joseph Esparza: I was at Weapons Company, for sure I was there, you know, the dates are blurry, but I remember being in Austin in September 11th, so I know in 2001 I had already been there for a year I guess.

Describe your memories of September 11th and what that meant to you being a Marine Reservist.

Joseph Esparza: I don't know, you know, every phone call was an interesting ring tone to it, but then I found out that every phone call was my mother wondering if they've called. I don't, no, they haven't. I remember being with my sister-in-law Lea, and my nephew at their house and when it all happened, so me and Lea were watching TV the whole time and we were just wondering what's coming next, but yeah, we kept the phones open, but I think there was something, there was a work-up to Afghanistan pretty quick after that and then we'd end up, we ended up training into Iraq.

Did you go, I know there were some Marines from Weapons Company that went to Gitmo, volunteered or went there to help with the security? You weren't part of that?

Joseph Esparza: No sir.

But do you remember that when they were asking for volunteers or how that happened?

Joseph Esparza: I didn't know how that worked. I think the guys that went were from -

Like a platoon or something?

Joseph Esparza: Bravo detachment, because when we had, at the time they didn't have them there, we didn't have a Bravo, but Bravo, people lived in Austin, we had a detachment from Bravo Company, the entry guys that were, they would always train with us, so I think they were pretty much those guys went.

So you mentioned Iraq. Describe then going down the road a little bit what it was like when you learned that your unit was going to get called up and go to Iraq.

Joseph Esparza: OK, I guess I just started working for the General Land Office as a matter of fact. I think it was one of the, and I will say it was one of the coolest jobs I ever had being in Corpus field office working just, I love fish and salt water and, that I remember just getting used to being down there and then finally kind of, and I think it was partly my fault because I kind of got used to it, and we got called up so I made arrangements to head back to Austin, moved all my stuff into a trailer or into a storage unit, just made sure somebody was taking care of my dog and gave my truck to my brother.

What did the folks at the Land Office say when you told them you were getting deployed?

Joseph Esparza: They were all just proud, obviously. It was a shock. They were worried and well wishes and they ended up sending me a bunch of care packages while I was up there, out there, so I always appreciated that. It was nice hearing from Stella and Renee and Manuel, but it was a bummer. I was working a job measuring fishing piers and running around with biologists on the salt water bays and so it was a good time.

So when you got the notice that your unit was going to get called up and sent to Iraq, what were you thinking? Do you remember what your thoughts were?

Joseph Esparza: Well I kind of thought a little bit about it. It was almost like wow, not really it's about time, but it was just a feeling of relief because it was kind of like let's get one out, and we'd been training, I'd been training with the Weapons Company for four years, and it all got ripped pretty quick. They did a great job of getting everybody ready. The administration there was just making sure everybody had all their ducks in a row and we got -

So as a reserve battalion, just for the listeners, meant that you got activated and then did you go somewhere for training?

Joseph Esparza: Yes sir, there was our first stint was our two weeks at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and I'd always wanted to go to Louisiana, but it was not, I guess it wasn't that way -

Not a real tourist spot.

Joseph Esparza: No, it was, Fort Polk had been a good place for us to get our feet wet clearing houses and they had a lot, you know, great facilities for that, it was just that's all we did. I think there was a mount town there and we just worked that for two weeks and getting that ingrained in us and it was real hazy. It was good, humid weather.

Yeah, you feel like you're in the jungle there. So you did two weeks there and then what?

Joseph Esparza: Two weeks there. I can't remember, I think, I'm sure we came back on, yeah we did, we took a bus back here to Austin at Camp Mabry, and then shortly thereafter we headed out to 29 Palms where we were gonna use the ranges and get I guess acclimated to the desert heat as much as we could, get out there. You just really, you know, you got used to the heat really quick. You were just definitely hot during all the time.

It's a huge, 29 Palms is such a huge base and so remote, and I spent two and a half months out there just training in the desert.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, following around – I had found a place with the Weapons Company and running around following the captain, Captain Ogden who was the head of the heavy gun platoon, the Cat Teams that were out there, so I kind of went with the trucks and where the guys went and just made sure everything was running.

How were the vehicles?

Joseph Esparza: The vehicles that we used, I think we were using some new vehicles that we took out there and they weren't gonna be the ones we deployed with, but it was just, batteries were just, things like heat just takes a toll on the vehicle as well as a person. My whole objective during that time was to get used to anticipating what the heat was doing to the trucks, you know, overheating, making sure I knew how to educate the guys who were driving them on what happens if your vehicle overheats and you can't – there's things you can do. Those Humvee's were, I can't compare them to those Mighty Mikes, the Jeeps that they came out, but they were rugged, obviously.

Do you feel that those two and a half months got you pretty well prepared once you got to Iraq?

Joseph Esparza: No, I kind of thought of that two and a half months there, just as one step into it, I wasn't even gonna try to imagine what Iraq was like at the time. Obviously we were hearing stories and we were getting sit reps on what we were going to be doing. Everything we had to practice that we got used to doing helped immensely, but I knew that as far as the Marine Corps goes, don't get too comfortable doing one thing. Be flexible.

Sure. What are your memories about your actual trip to Iraq and your first impressions?

Joseph Esparza: Kuwait, I guess, just how, I guess Kuwait had to be hotter than Iraq, it just seemed like just for that first initial blast of heat that you're feeling and you're like, you're wondering if you're going to get used to it. You spent the whole time in the Mojave Desert getting used to that heat and you're thinking you're in great shape. You get to Kuwait and gosh, just, you still had a lag time. Thankfully we had about a week to get situated. Not in Iraq – I think we were only in Iraq for like an hour or so and then we got on C-130's.

You mean in Kuwait.

Joseph Esparza: Oh yeah, Kuwait, I'm sorry. We stopped in Kuwait, flew into Al Asad Air Base there at the Alanbar Province and I think that was pretty much where we were starting to get pieced out as far as the map platoons and finding out what maintenance bays were available for the trucks.

The vehicles you had were ones that had been used by the previous unit.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, and that's another thing was the big deal. We were getting on those left seat / right seat runs with the guys who were already there. We were inheriting their trucks and their gear pretty much while in country. That was useful. I remember going out with a few of the guys that would go and almost like it was a tour on what they were doing, and our sergeants

and our guys that were on the foot, they were taking notes like it was gospel, and that was just good. The guys we went there with were just, they were locked on.

Describe what it was like the first time you actually went out on a patrol, went outside the base.

Joseph Esparza: I guess it was actually the first time I would have went out was on, we were recovering vehicles. There were already vehicles rolling over the land mines and I would get on some of the missions that were going out basically as a fill in the blank. It was always good to have a mechanic but it was, you know, between the maintenance base working on our trucks, making sure that everything, everybody's was still mission capable. There would be one that would have to be recovered. That was interesting. One of the things I do remember is that on the road, that hot wind, that oven furnace would almost like it would sear your lungs when you breathed in. It was definitely a shock.

Do you remember consciously thinking like when you went out that first time, I'm actually going out in it now?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, you pass the gates and it's just you and your rat patrol team I guess, and whatever trucks were with you. I totally remember thinking the first time that we went off road, thinking it was like driving off the side of the earth. You're on pavement and then all of a sudden you were out there on improved road, and then you're thinking these improved roads, like man, you're totally going to see a lump if you ever rolled over something, but that was just wishful thinking I guess.

What about the Iraqi people? Do you remember the first time you had any interaction with them?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, passing by. Obviously we saw them on the way in and I guess the people that were working there at Al Asad, I think I was in Al Asad for probably two months or that first month that we were there, but passing them on the road they have their, kind of like almost what farmer's markets would be to us – those meat stands, salted meat, just kind of hanging out in the breeze. I was expecting exactly what a lot of people were thinking about that place – pretty Biblical, definitely interested in their agriculture and seeing how the hell they could survive out there. Probably some of the best irrigated farmers in the world. But it was kind of neat to see the kids running around chasing us, looking at what we were doing. There was nervous, too, there was a lot of just nervous seeing them as well as kind of interested. I think that kind of went both ways with those people.

Were you ever on any of the patrols that hit an IED or land mine?

Joseph Esparza: Fortunately I wasn't. I know we were in a longer convoy that something, one of the guys rolled over, but it ended up being like an Army truck that was out there at a checkpoint that we were rolling through that blasted, and I remember rolling by it and just thinking they're out there, you know, it's definitely not safe. But I guess one of the most interesting things that happened to me was, you know, I was fixing trucks for pretty much the whole battalion at that time. Weapons Company was pieced out into their map platoons and they were on their missions and I was still close by them, but at the time, I was working for H&S Company, I was with H&S Company.

What were some of the biggest repairs you had to do? What was a typical repair?

Joseph Esparza: Our 7 tons, those things would take a land mine. It would roll over a land mine and then they were out. I know we weren't technically supposed to do it, but we would tear apart anything we could get off of it to fix other trucks. The thing that sticks out in my mind the most was brakes and shocks, tires. They were so grossly over-weighted with the combat load and driving as many miles as they did. We were having, we would get guys that were sent down as a working party to just replace tires for a whole day. I remember retreading thousands of tires. Our mechanics had gone through, you know, we would get a truckload and then those things would be worked, and we got it down to a science.

Were the vehicles over-weighted, too, because you put extra armor on them?

Joseph Esparza: Oh, the armor, yeah, that was it. It was kind of shoddy armor that a lot of times was welded on. It was sandbag ammo armor.

I guess now it's supposedly gotten better with some of the vehicles they have, the wraps and things. When you were there, they didn't have any of that.

Joseph Esparza: We had the up armor, some up armor trucks that definitely, you know, took a little time to get used to fixing them because it was so hard to get components and especially if you're in a rush to get it out, if it was on the road. I think a few of the maps had at least one in every one of their platoons, at least one.

You see their reports out of there now, they have all the kind of the M-wrap with the V-shaped -

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, they look science fiction.

And you see the ring mounts have all sorts of shields. It's completely different from what you guys had out there at that time. I think the only M-wrap type vehicle I remember seeing was some sort of, I don't know if they were Blackwater or what, but they were some sort of contractor out there pulling up stuff at one of the ammo supply points, and they had a couple of those, V-shaped hulls, and that was a little different. What about morale? What was morale like during the time you were there?

Joseph Esparza: You know, I guess I'm still thinking through Al Asad, morale was just morale. It was the guys were tired and endless in and out missions going all the time, organization was always from what I could see was spot on. You'd get word about something coming up, but it was just the first couple of months was a lot of learning.

You were there during the holidays, right? Thanksgiving, Christmas -

Joseph Esparza: Yes sir, I think we got there in May – no, no -

August –

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, it would have been August. You know, football season. There was always talk about what was going on back home of course, and real, it wasn't a month or a month and a half into the deployment when I was told I was gonna be on some kind of a dance party to go move up to inhabit a dam in the deep end, and I was excited. It was kind of like -

Something different –

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, it was something different. Al Asad was pretty regimented. It wasn't like I wanted to get into any hot zones or anything, but definitely a change of life. I heard I was going to be going toward where the Euphrates River is, and that's -

Yeah, you read about that in the Bible.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah it is, that's all it is, the Euphrates River Valley was just going to be amazing.

Describe the dam and what it was like when you got there.

Joseph Esparza: Well, the dam was inhabited pretty sparsely by one of the, I know a company of, from North Carolina out there at Came Lejeune. I know that's kind of where they were from because I actually knew one of the staff sergeants that was one of my instructors when I was going through my MOS school.

The one eight?

Joseph Esparza: Gunny Cleveland, yeah, it was one-eight, I think you're right. They were there. The security was posted by the Aj by Johnny's, those guys were amazing. They were always, they were hard core, those guys. But there wasn't a whole lot of facilities. It was pretty primitive.

It was a big hydroelectric dam?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, it was a hydroelectric dam that from what I was told wasn't running, or just started to run it at a higher percentage after Saddam was out of power. It was pretty neat. I was kind of star struck by seeing the river. The dam workers, they were locals and kind of seeing them just kind of really? But I mean, you do what you do. Let them live, too. But I remember kind of being at an outpost when the one-eight took off, they kind of just left it to us and it was, I don't know how many people we were, but I know that there were only two guys, me and another gentleman from, who was from a truck company from Lejeune was out and me and him were pretty much an outpost for wounded vehicles that would come in and we'd get it fixed, we'd patch 'em up. We'd get picked up on, there was a detachment of small craft that was out there, so we would go on patrols with those guys. And they were only about 7 guys. So their small boats, which everybody is up for a boat ride, so why not? I remember going on patrols with those guys basically just kind of watching over, providing support fire for anything, movement in town or any kind of mission.

That was just for a short period of time though, right, until the rest of your battalion -

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I think it was after maybe a month before the rest of the battalion got there. But we got pretty good at doing without before the rest of the battalion moved in. One of the map platoons from Weapons Company was there, so I got, I was pretty excited to be around my friends again, so that was kind of a neat thing.

And I know once you got up there, once the battalion got up there, that's when they began to take their first casualties. What are some of your memories about that?

Joseph Esparza: I guess one of the first ones is coming up through, around Thanksgiving, word was things were getting a lot heated and we were going out on, to recover vehicles or going out to fill in for people who were sick at the time. There was some kind of flu bug running rampant through our map platoons and they were just patching together anybody who could fill a seat for a little bit. But yeah, a good friend of mine who was from Corpus Christi, he was here at UT going to school, I pal'd around with him the whole time while we were in training Weapons Company. He passed away December 2nd. It was pretty surreal. You kind of catch up with everybody. You knew something was going on and everybody just didn't want to say anything about it, or there was some, like you see people and they were like well, did you hear about Zach? Obviously not. But yeah, it hit pretty hard. He was a star, the star of that company I thought it was just because he was such a personal kid, always funny, always hiding around, always welcome to see you, always wanted to stay up and chat. I remember it was Thanksgiving when we were in the dam with the rest of the company was still there, and we just had chow and everybody was kind of getting phone calls or whatever they were doing, and me and Zach had stepped out and we were making little videos to talk, to send home I guess, and I remember him doing one on his camera and we pitched it back and forth and that was Thanksgiving, and he died on December 2nd.

A few days after.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, one of the things I remember most about that was just not wanting to, it was a lot easier not to ask how you were doing or ask anybody how it was just because, but yeah, that night after that, or the night that we were making those videos, he wanted me to go out and smoke a cigarette with him. I didn't smoke, but I was gonna go out there and something ended up happening. I think somebody was able to get a phone or something and Zach went and made a phone call. I told him I'd meet him. I guess I started playing cards and by the time he finished his phone call, I guess he smoked a cigarette and I went out and I just missed him. But you know, had I picked up smoking I guess I would've had a good memory of hanging out and I didn't see him. That was the last time I saw him.

And then not much longer after that, I guess your battalion lost some more in January.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, __ fighting Aston.

It never got easier though, did it, to deal with that sort of thing? Did you get numb to it at all?

Joseph Esparza: No, I really didn't. There was a time, after January when I got, like I said, you know, fill in the blank kind of being flexible, I got put into a platoon that was kind of scratched up from everybody who was able, and I guess I was one of the only guys that from the Weapons Company that had had any machine gun experience just by training with them and learning from the heavy guns guys on drills and how to clean it and take it apart. We went out for like one of the last big missions there was Operation Riverblitz. I remember that being just kind of right at the end, right when I didn't see anybody that I really kind of knew, and I was getting handed over to different units and I remember being attached to a Cat Team from Pendleton.

Were you in the ring mount vehicles then at that point?

Joseph Esparza: No, this thing, I was in the back of a troop carrier, a pennel mount that dismount that 240 and we'd walk and that's when like I said, I'm sorry, I don't remember the dates all that well, but I remember hearing word from the map platoons that I would see that something happened to one of the other guys, and just, at that time they had been like a world away.

I know, too, that your battalion was there during the Iraqi elections. Were you part of that at all?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, we pretty much babysat an election. The election station was at a radio station and people would always joke about the big white, red and white radio tower looking like an aiming stake right at the center of the whole deal. We were in holes outside of that place and thankfully we had the LAR, I guess the LAR was out there providing bigger support. There was a border fire basically.

They fired at you during the election, right?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I think there was only, I think our station that we were at only had about one, I guess that was a rumor anyway that we only had one person -

You had a couple of people come vote there -

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, made it through there to actually vote and they were so damn proud about it. It was a real thing, it was great for me to be there was kind of a big deal to be a country's first free election, and thinking about how much they are sacrificing where they're trying to get just so they can change the world that they're in.

People here have probably no idea what it would be like to try to go vote and people are shooting rockets.

Joseph Esparza: You're jumping in the holes and trying to get through there.

They'll kill you before you go vote.

Joseph Esparza: It was definitely, that was a big historic time that I was proud to be about and I think we were able to snag some voting sheets. Obviously they had quite a bit.

Would be a neat souvenir.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah.

So all that's done, what's it like when you finally get ready to head back home over here.

Joseph Esparza: Getting to the last couple of weeks, you know, you've made it so far and nothing's really kind of happened, you were very fortunate not to get hurt in any way, but then that one last mission that comes out, you kind of hear it coming down through the rumor mill that hey, we need to go spend three days that turn into 16 days supporting some guys from a rooftop. And you're just kind of riding along. You're kind of nervous. You know, you talk to a lot of your guys. I remember one funny thing is that talking to my friend, Mike, Michael Flores, who was a sergeant there at Weapons Company with the headquarters, and finding out that hey,

catching up with him, finding out what things, what's new, how everybody is, and he's like yeah, advance party, man, about a week away. We're leaving to go back. And you're just like that's awesome. And him leaving and you're like oh, by the way, I'm going to be going out with so and so. I guess there's something going on, some big deal that's happening down in the D-3rd or Barwani or wherever it was, and like man, yeah. I hope I get to see you again.

Otherwise you were getting close to the end.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, you're getting so close to the end and it's kind of like you want to be so damn careful, you're kind of thinking what's gonna happen now? Or just this one last big push before we leave. It was kind of the big deal was I guess that was the whole idea of Riverblitz was to beat 'em back far enough to allow the new guys to come in and step in -

Have a clean slate.

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, and it was pretty fortunate. That was kind of a wild time for me because like I said, I was kind of put in a seat, put in a truck with a bunch of guys I'd never even met going on their, they'd been together since the whole time or their teams were already pieced in, and now they've got me sitting in their truck, and I'm pretty personal and I know my place, and they know more than I do. That's kind of how I took things so I just obviously followed orders and followed direction, and we assaulted a hotel to get on top of the roof to provide support and fire for a lot of platoons that were kicking in houses down there, but that was kind of an interesting -

That lasted right up until you left?

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I remember that three days that we were supposed to be there turned into about 16, and sure enough we got off that hotel. We stayed on that roof for a good 8 days I could probably remember. And getting back to, but it was kind of neat. It was neat to finally be done with this mission knowing that we're gonna get back, and man, everybody is already, it's like you and your two roommates were having to move and maybe you were at work, and then oh, all the packing's done. It's kind of how you hoped it was, but yeah, there was still a lot of work to be done by the time I got back.

When did you finally breathe easy again?

Joseph Esparza: You know, I think it was almost like when we were all loading up that convoy that first day that we knew we were about to head out, that first convoy where you got to see people you hadn't seen who had been detached to hit or out to Korean Village -

You weren't nervous on that last convoy?

Joseph Esparza: You know, I really wasn't. It was almost kind of the whole complacency thing was still, you know, my head was down. It was kind of the whole deal. I wouldn't leave nothing to chance I guess is what it was, but it was a good feeling.

Then so you finally get back to the U.S. What was that like for you?

Joseph Esparza: We got back on Easter Sunday. I remember that was a great time. We were in San Diego for Easter Sunday and a few of us had gone down in San Diego and had a good

time, maybe a little south of San Diego, who's to say. It was a good deal, coming back and then finally there back at 29 Palms for a good while and make sure we got all our weapons back into the locker and back into the armory. You're getting ready, come to find out my dog died while I was over there. Yeah, we didn't want to tell you, and I go yeah, well, I kind of felt bad for the family that was taking care of my dog, but once you got a cell phone, kind of started to call everybody and it was getting real exciting. People were talking about Austin having a big deal and Austin was ready to see us and it was a year. It had been a full year.

What was your homecoming like back in Austin?

Joseph Esparza: It was pretty exciting. Full escort from the mounted motorcycle police that were there. It was good. It was definitely a big, you know, coming back to Camp Mabry was, they brought out the whole nine yards with the good dinner, the food was getting, the speaker was there, the governor, first lady, Mac Brown, some family that I hadn't seen in a while. It was just surprising to see how many people that kept you in their hearts while you were away.

Well I tell you, it's been a good interview and I appreciate you taking the time to share this with us as you probably know having worked at the Land Office, we have archives here that go back hundreds of years, and so -

Joseph Esparza: Yeah, I've got my name in some working sketches out there.

So the whole idea behind this interview is that this will be added to that, and then in a few weeks we'll send you copies of this interview that you can hold onto or give to family or whatever, and Commissioner Patterson will send you a certificate and all that.

Joseph Esparza: I was glad to come back to work. They were gracious enough to make a spot for me here in Austin, so I wanted to do school and coincidentally enough I remember coming up to see you when you were up there on the 7th or 9th floor. It was kind of neat to see you. Those were good times. So yeah definitely glad I was able to come back.

Yeah, well we're glad to have you and on behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone here at the Land Office, thanks for your service. This program is about recognizing our veterans and thanking you for what you did. So thanks a lot.

Joseph Esparza: Thank you sir. Good to see you.

[End of recording]